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ABSTRACT

A professional update team of foreign language teachers promotes the interests of the membership and encourages cooperation and professional improvement at all levels. The first task in organizing such a group is to choose individuals who represent all segments of the profession and to include administrators in as active a capacity as possible. The planning committee identifies the objectives of the organization and writes a proposal to be presented to administrators as well as to prospective members. It also decides on the size and variety of the membership and begins the recruiting process. Follow-up meetings would include additional interested persons and would result in personal recruitment. In addition to personal contacts, timely press releases stimulate interest in such a project. The planning committee has to decide on the governance of the organization as well as the format and regularity of meetings. In the Southwest Virginia Association, regular meetings held on specific days four times a year, minimal dues, and elected officers were found to be the format that interested the members and involved them most actively. The firm direction that was given the association early in its history assured continuing interest and growing attendance. (AMH)

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A COLLABORATIVE PROFESSIONAL UPDATE TEAM IN SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA, YEAR TWO

Each of us on the panel has the task of telling you about our experiences with our own collaborative professional update team. I think that the most important and useful thing that you can hear from me, out of all the information that I could relate, is how one goes about establishing such a team or, at least, how we have gone about setting up ours.

As Claire Gaudiani said in her introductory remarks, these collaborative professional update teams are to function on the model of county bar associations and medical societies, which promote the interests of their respective memberships and which encourage cooperation and professional improvement at all their levels. Unfortunately for us in education, we do not have the long tradition of private control and self direction that belongs to both the legal and medical communities. Therefore, the job of establishing an update team of teachers is a new kind of endeavor and calls for a certain amount of entrepreneurship: it demands the correct mixture of firm direction and group participation in order to succeed.

Before I begin the narrative of our activities, let me describe briefly the geographical situation in which we had to work. Our group, the Holston Language Association, is located in the Appalachian highlands of southwest Virginia. The region is mainly rural and sparsely populated, including three counties with an average population density of only sixty-five people per square mile, plus a small city of 30,000 on the southern edge of the area.

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The combined city and county school systems have a total of only twelve high schools, but at least one foreign language is taught in each of them. In all, the Association has a potential membership of forty-five teachers and teacher-preparation candidates from public and private high schools and colleges, and the greatest distance that anyone would have to travel to a meeting is sixty miles one way. With these particular conditions in mind, you should better understand our experience of organizing a professional update team.

Once you have decided to attempt such a group, the first task to perform is to choose the people who will serve as the organizing cadre for the association. I encourage you to make it a mixture of teachers from both the secondary and post-secondary levels (elementary, too, if your area has the good fortune to have them) and to include administrators from both levels, in an approving role if not as active participants. One of the ticklish problems that you will encounter at the beginning is how to identify the people for this cadre and how to invite their participation. The strategy that I used, and that I think proved successful, was to invite two high school teachers to meet with me and to help me write a proposal of what we wanted the organization to be. The fact that this preliminary proposal was a collaborative effort set the tone of cooperation among the different levels of education that make up the organization. The danger of college or university dominance threatens, thanks to the natural pecking order, and college-level people must continually guard against their natural inclination to direct everything themselves.

I was fortunate in being able to choose two teachers whom I had observed as they supervised student teachers from our college in the public schools; the skill and enthusiasm that I had seen in them there were encouraging signs.

In addition to my own resources, public school administrators responded to my requests for suggestions and recommendations of possible collaborators. One thing that I would now change in recruiting this initial group, if I had it to do over again, is to make it larger. As I shall emphasize later, the number of people actively involved in the project is directly proportional to its success.

I included administrators in the planning stage only to inform them of what we were doing and to seek their support. We were lucky enough to get the encouragement both from the dean of my college and from the supervisors of foreign language instruction in the two counties that we initially organized. One of the public school administrators has encouraged the teachers in his division to attend by granting in-service credit for their participation. You may be able to include administrators in a more active role, and this could be valuable--if they don't stifle the vocal participation of teachers by their mere presence--but our administrators were happy enough to let us do the work and simply to approve our efforts.

The first task facing the original cadre is to write a proposal that will identify the objectives of the organization. This paper permits the group to clarify its thoughts, and it gives a yardstick against which to measure progress and in contrast to which changes can be made. It also offers a convenient instrument for later recruiting. After writing the proposal, the cadre's next item is to decide how large a pool of members it will attempt to engage and how. This depends on several factors, of which a few are the interests within the potential group, the minimum critical mass needed to make the unit stimulating, the geographical factors that might affect the decision, how the cadre can best promote a contagious interest in the group, and whether

one large group or several smaller units would accomplish the goals better. All these matters come down to a realistic appraisal of the audience, and the cadre's first appraisal might not be the best one.

In our situation, we originally decided to include two county school systems (13 teachers), two small liberal arts colleges (9 teachers), and one community college (1 teacher). Because of the great distances that some of our members needed to travel, we thought that this area would be the most fruitful. But then we learned that teachers in a third county were interested in joining us, despite the distance, so we included them and the faculty at a branch of the University of Virginia. Emboldened by this success, we decided to cross the Tennessee state line and to invite teachers from a large county system in that state. But this last decision has proved frustrating so far. I think that the differences in state school systems and thus the assumed, if not real, differences in needs, have discouraged them. This is the type of problem that geography can pose. I imagine that similar problems can arise in an entirely urban area as well.

As to how to recruit teachers to come to the first meeting, I suggest hard work and personal contact. Of those who attended our first meeting, I or another of the original organizers knew them all. Since that time, two of us have made a recruiting trip into another county--calling on high school teachers while they were in school but between classes--and I have been able to talk personally to the teachers of another county system when I conducted a morning of in-service training at the beginning of this school year. These personal contacts have proved the most fruitful; the letters that we sent to people whom we didn't know probably ended up in the trash. It would therefore be a good idea to include a wide sample of people in the original group so

that their personal contacts can do a lot of the recruiting for you.

In this vein, let me encourage you also to talk to the members of the departments or schools of education in your colleges, for two reasons. First, these people might know some of the more promising prospects in the public schools and, second, they can tell you some fruitful ways to go about contacting both public school teachers and administrators. Personally, I have received good help from these people at Emory & Henry.

Once you have done all of this and the first meeting has been a success--partial if not complete--your follow-up can help you to enlarge your membership. With timely press releases from your school's publicity office, the local press will give you wider publicity for free than you could hope to pay for. Not only do other teachers learn about the group and get interested in participating--I received phone calls from three teachers whom I had not initially contacted--but the public at large has the opportunity to learn that the teachers of foreign language in the area are professionally alive, well, and growing.

There are a couple of other items in addition to organizing the first meeting that I want to mention to you. The first has to do with the governance of the association. We attempted, at first, to handle ours in a very informal fashion, having only a corresponding secretary who sent out invitations to meetings and who informed members of the group's activities. No dues, no officers, no worry. The result--no interest. In fact, I exaggerate, but I have found that by saving people from having to do work for which I assumed they didn't have time, I deprived them of becoming deeply involved in the group and of making a personal investment in its success. So this year we have moved from an ad hoc and informal structure to a "regularly" constituted

group. We now have officers, we collect nominal dues to pay for correspondence and coffee, and we meet more often and regularly. At first we intended to meet only twice a year at people's convenience; now we meet on the first Monday of October, December, February, and April. All of these changes have made us regular, they have increased people's investment and involvement in the group, and they have given us a feeling of being a real organization. Surely we should have known all this before we began, but it has taken some less successful moments to remind us. Our attempt to save people trouble jeopardized the health of the group for a while.

Another area of difficulty is to decide what kind of format the meetings will follow. In our association, we have tried several. We have had a formal meal in a public restaurant followed by a business session, pot-luck suppers in colleagues' homes followed by informal discussions of problems, and business sessions in a public school room followed by cookies and coffee. Each of these formats has its advantages and disadvantages, but I think that the most conducive kind of meeting for professional development is the more formal business meeting followed by a time when the members can circulate casually and chat. These more formal meetings encourage substantive programs, and the period following the main program does not discourage fellowship--a very real benefit that the association provides. The opportunity for members of the profession--from the same and from different levels of education--to talk informally is of great value. In fact, the discovery that we were not all out there alone fighting solitary battles against barbarism was the most important result of our first meetings.

The most serious problems that we have encountered in setting up and continuing the Holston Language Association have already been mentioned, but let me touch on them again briefly.

First, originally maintaining a membership can be a problem. We had little difficulty getting the first group together, but continued participation lagged, mainly because of the tentative way that we organized the meetings. I think that a regularization of procedures is one of the best ways to impress on everyone the seriousness of the enterprise.

A second, related problem is having the members prepare programs with meat on the bones. It is all too easy to let the meetings become little more than gripe sessions--an exercise that has initial and perhaps occasional value, particularly to create a feeling of professional solidarity--but in the long run, we want these associations to respond to problems and weaknesses and to remedy them, not simply to discuss them. Thus, the sooner a firm direction can be given to the programs, the better.

As an indication of our changes this year, we entertained the state supervisors of foreign language instruction at our October meeting in order to hear about curricular changes that will take place in the state high schools over the next two years. Attendance was the highest yet. Our December meeting was devoted to periodical review and to preparing an educational program to share with high school guidance counselors in February. Then at the February meeting we will entertain these guidance people and, we think, help to inform them of the broad and varied values of FL study for high school students. All too frequently, these people mention FL study only to students who are college bound, and then not to all of them. This is probably because they do not know the benefits of FL study, so we intend to tell them. This is the sort of program that is giving the members of our association a feeling of growth and of responding to visible problems.

All of this is to say that the concept of the collaborative professional

update team works and can provide meaningful results. It will not be easy, but with tact, ingenuity, and effort, it can be very successful, despite the several problems that I have pointed out. Our group has profited from the information that we have exchanged in our meetings, and particularly from the personal and professional contacts that we have made. The idea of the professional update team is certainly worth pursuing.

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